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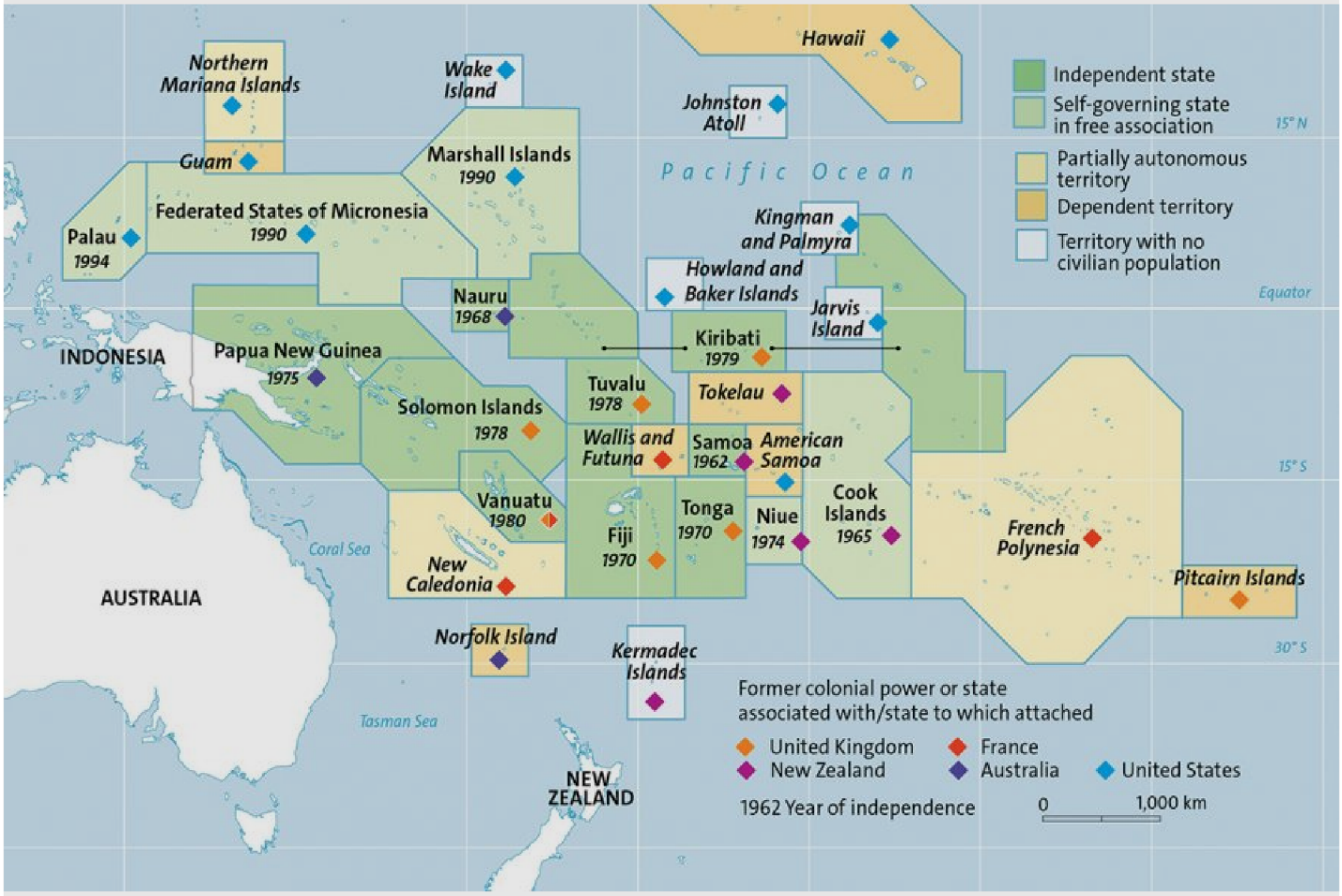
South Pacific islands risk US retaliation for not toeing the Washington line

A green revolution for the Cook Islands?

The Cook Islands are on the front line of climate change: their inhabitants are already experiencing the brunt of its impacts. So will their offshore mineral riches prove a blessing or a curse?

by Glen Johnson



Indo-Pacific: maritime areas' differing status

Cécile Marin

Tourists lounge about on a pristine beach or float in turquoise lagoons. Waves rise and crash against the coral reef that rings this tropical land. Music echoes from a beach bar. But this idyllic scene belies the numerous, coalescing problems facing the Cook Islands, a collection of 15 islands (atolls, coral and volcanic islands) in the central South Pacific.

Celine Dyer is climate change coordinator at the Cook Islands Office of the Prime Minister. She is sat in a small office in Avarua, an administrative district on the island of Rarotonga, with two of her colleagues, climate change youth ambassador Charlene Akaruru and project communicator Terito Story. They discuss the myriad impacts of an overheating world: saltwater inundation, coastal erosion, ocean acidification, higher intensity storms, disappearing fish spawning grounds. Seawalls are being erected. Communities across various islands will have to be relocated and tide gauge markers installed, to help local fishermen – the descendants of navigators who could read the stars and sea currents – understand tidal changes.

The northern string of islands is being critically affected, changing traditional ways of life. ‘Forty years ago, we were still able to maintain our traditional way of doing things: fishing, growing crops,’ says Dyer. ‘But not any longer.’

People used to be able to paddle canoes out to passages surrounding the islands and fish from there. But that way of life is vanishing as communities are forced to venture further out into the warming seas. ‘Now they have to do more work, exert more energy to find food to feed their families,’ says Dyer. ‘They have to buy an outboard motor, an aluminium boat and fuel. That’s an extra cost for our people. They don’t work, there are no jobs in the outer islands … it is a loss of identity.’

The reef that rings Rarotonga is degrading, making it vulnerable to algal growth, which dinoflagellates (small, toxic organisms) attach to, working through the food chain and ultimately leading to food poisoning in communities reliant on the sea for sustenance. Known as ciguatera poisoning, it can lead to paralysis and death.

Rising sea levels also threaten burial grounds. In the Cook Islands, relatives are buried close to home, in carefully maintained memorials often decorated with frangipani and gardenias. ‘These graves will be lost to the waves. It’s like the annihilation of our people,’ says Dyer.

Long before Captain Cook

In the Cook Islands library and museum, tucked away among buildings from the early missionary period, local history and culture are on display. Paintings celebrate the early Polynesian seafarers who sailed large double-hulled canoes to these shores. Captain James Cook sighted Manuae, in the islands’ southern group, in 1773, long after Polynesian peoples had settled here and established trade and migration routes that crisscrossed the Pacific.

Many here are concerned about a disappearing traditional culture. Early missionaries banned singing, dancing and drumming. Instead, cultural celebration became centred on the church, and

colonial sacral cultures retain significant influence upon society. Migration also contributes: by the 1970s more Cook Islanders lived in New Zealand than on the islands themselves.

And financial pressures are keenly felt across the Cook Islands, their economy structured around the service sector and diaspora remittances. Its manufacturing sector is tiny: a bit of fruit processing, clothing production and handicrafts. Foreign trade is largely one-way, leading to a trade deficit that is serviced by financial aid from New Zealand.

Drivers of the green revolution

The hulking orange and white research vessel *Anuanua Moana* is berthed at Rarotonga's Avatiu Harbour. It is owned by Moana Minerals, one of three companies to which the Cook Islands have given permission to explore their exclusive economic zone (EEZ). The exploration phase is in its third year.

The companies are seeking to mine the sea floor for polymetallic nodules. Roughly the size of a potato, the nodules contain valuable minerals: cobalt, copper, nickel and manganese. They are seen as essential to transitioning away from fossil fuels and as drivers of the 'green revolution'. The Cook Islands likely have several billion tonnes lying on the sea floor.

Prime minister Mark Brown appears to have already made his mind up, believing that mining could dramatically improve the islands' economic fortunes and help them adapt to the existential climate change threat. 'Do not tell me to ignore the potential for promoting the green transition by not exploring these much-needed minerals for the green revolution that sit in my ocean,' Brown told the 2022 COP climate conference in Sharm el-Sheikh. 'Many of our Pacific cultures have an embedded culture of conservation and environmental protection far better than these countries calling for a moratorium, who continue to emit carbon at thousands of times the rate we do.'

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> Mark Brown

The nodules have built up over millions of years. Little is known about the role they play in marine systems: the sea floor is not well understood and largely unexplored. Extraction could be devastating, relying on truck-sized rovers to scrape the seabed, sending the nodules in vast quantities via giant tentacle-like pipes to vessels on the surface.

'We are approaching this in a very careful manner, we have all the legal frameworks in place, we are very strict in terms of adhering to the precautionary approach … we want to be able to harvest a resource that will benefit our country in a responsible manner,' said an official at the Cook

Islands ministry of foreign affairs and trade (MFAT). 'Is it viable, will it be worth it? All those issues that we haven't yet been able to answer because we don't have the actual data. We just know that we have these critical minerals that would help to transition to clean energy. Not just us, it would help the region, and wider international partners.'

Who's overseeing the mining?

But where is the oversight? The three mining companies – Moana Minerals, Cobalt Seabed Resources and CIC Ocean Research – are tasked with reporting their findings back to the government. It is farcical to imagine that, given the enormous investments already made, they will simply walk away if the Cook Islands decide not to pursue mining.

Environmentalists have raised major concerns, particularly over the destruction of deep-sea habitats and the vast, choking sediment plumes that excavation would produce. And there are the flow-on impacts of all that light and noise on marine life.

Deep-sea mining is revealing divides in the Pacific: Kiribati, Nauru and Tonga appear determined to go ahead with critical metals extraction; Tuvalu, Palau and Vanuatu express serious misgivings. Regardless, the Americans are coming, bringing their war machine with them. As always, resource extraction and Western war-making are in symbiosis.

Last September, the US recognised the Cook Islands as a sovereign state, opening up the prospect of them receiving BUILD Act loans from Washington (1). Republican senator Marco Rubio immediately urged an influx of US cash to harvest the nodules. 'As you know, few critical mineral resource deposits and development efforts are free of the malicious and coercive political influence of the Peoples' Republic of China,' Rubio wrote. 'The seabed of the Cook Islands … contains a high-density deposit of critical minerals, including rare earth elements, for which there is growing demand and need to develop secure and reliable supply chains for American economic security and prosperity' (2).

Similarly, NATO announced its intent to achieve 'interoperability' in the Pacific, part of a strategy of 'full-spectrum dominance' outlined at its Madrid summit in 2022, which also placed Beijing in the alliance's crosshairs and was attended by so-called NATO+ allies for the first time: Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea. 'Like Russia, it [China] seeks to undermine the international rules-based order,' NATO secretary-general Jens Stoltenberg told the summit. 'So we must continue to stand together … to protect our values and our freedom and to promote peace and prosperity.'

Can the Pacific stand up to the West?

Some fear that the region's nuclear-free policies, established under the 1986 Treaty of Rarotonga – following decades of British, French and American testing in the region – may well be assailed as Washington continues its inexorable march to conflict with Beijing. The question is, can the

Pacific unify around a rejection of Western imperialism and militarism, just as it stood up to nuclear testing in the region throughout the 1970s and 80s? Yet in today's Pacific those great anti-nuclear and antiwar movements – bound up with indigenous rights activism – have lost much of their potency. And the US, which never ratified the Rarotonga treaty, clearly wants to integrate the region into its nuclear policies.

'China is a great partner to [us] and the US is a great partner. We signed diplomatic relations with the US last September, we have been diplomatic partners with China for a number of years,' said the MFAT official. 'For us it is not a big question, we deal with both partners.'

Yet the Cook Islands are clearly picking the side of the US. Others, such as the Solomon Islands, which last year signed a security agreement with Beijing, wish to take a different approach – at great risk of US retaliation.

At the beginning of February, Brown announced his desire to see the islands form a trilateral defence and security partnership with Australia and New Zealand (3). Canberra signed up to the AUKUS pact with Britain and the US in 2021, committing US$368bn for the acquisition of nuclear submarines and reneging on a deal with France.

New Zealand's defence and foreign ministries and new government (4) – which includes the far right – are presently exploring joining the alliance's second pillar, focused on research and development, meaning automated warfare – drones, killer robots, swarm intelligence etc. 'AUKUS's fundamental purpose is to extend nuclear deterrence by involving Australia in a containment strategy for China and for the basing of US nuclear capable assets, outsourcing their risk [to the Asia-Pacific],' said Marco de Jong, a Pacific historian at the Auckland University of Technology. 'Pillar two seeks to develop disruptive technologies and win a next-generation arms race. I think this is chilling: the dehumanised race for the next-generation doomsday machines is deeply concerning.'

Step-by-step, the Pacific is being integrated into the United States' security architecture and, crucially, its long-standing goal of achieving first-strike nuclear dominance.

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(1) New Zealand's high-income status and free association with the Cook Islands disqualified the latter from receiving certain development funds.

(2) Letter of 17 October 2023, www.rubio.senate.gov/ [http://www.rubio.senate.gov/].

(3) 'Cook Islands and Australia celebrate 30 years partnership – Cook Islands call for trilateral defence and security arrangement', Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Immigration, Government of the Cook Islands, 1 February 2024, mfai.gov.ck/.

(4) The previous Labour-led government was also amenable to US militarism, with former prime ministers Jacinda Ardern and Chris Hipkins attending NATO conferences in Madrid and Vilnius.